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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the importance of student journal writing for language exploration and experimentation, this project examined the impact of introducing student/teacher dialogues as part of the journal format for kindergartners. In the fall of the academic year, journal writing was introduced, and students wrote in journals every day. The teacher's role was to discuss each student's writing with him or her at least once a week, rarely writing in their journals. Occasionally, the teacher would make entries in her own journal. Concerns about lack of progress in fluency and diversity in children's writing led the teacher to interview a random sample of nine students about their attitudes toward journal writing. Findings revealed that students were very positive about journal writing. Teacher/student journal dialogues were initiated. Weekly conferences with students continued, and anecdotal records were made of student participation. Journal entries made prior to and after the introduction of dialogues were compared. The results indicated that, in comparison to the previous format, when dialogues were part of the format students wrote in their journals for a longer time, covered more paper with their writing, explored a wider variety of writing forms, and discussed a wider range of topics. (Contains 21 references.) (KDFB)

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How will changing our kindergarten journal format to include student/teacher dialogue affect student participation?

Jean Hannon

Spring, 1996

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Abstract

Journal writing is a valued piece in emergent literacy programs. I was comfortable with the journal writing format in our classroom and felt that the students were also. It was time for all of us to be nudged from our complacency. Dialogue, as a part of our journal writing format, was introduced during the second semester of this school year. I was interested in observing what effect this addition would have on student participation. In general, students wrote for a longer time, covered more paper with their writing, explored a wider variety of writing forms, and discussed a wider range of topics when they anticipated teacher response.

Journal Writing as Exploration and Experimentation

For children to think of themselves as writers, they need to write daily (Avery, 1992; Collins, 1993; Fisher, 1991; Routman, 1988; Taylor, l996). For children to view themselves as successful writers, they need opportunities to explore written language independently, in purposeful ways, in a noncompetitive environment without fear of evaluation (Chapman, l996; Fields and Spangler,1995). For children to take the risks necessary to move forward in their learning about written language, acceptance of what they can do, confidence in their ability to progress, and encouragement of their efforts are prerequisite (Newman, 1984; Taylor, l996).

In many classrooms, one of the forms of daily writing is journaling. Journals provide a vehicle for children to learn written language by using it (Calkins, 1986). A specific time is set aside each day for journal writing, and students are encouraged to spend this time writing, thinking about their writing, or conferencing on their writing (Routman, 1988, Staton, 1987). It is a time for children to further their experimentation with print. The actual writing in emergent literacy classrooms may take a variety of forms: drawing, scribbling, letter-like shapes, random letters, memorized or environmental print, invented spelling, or conventional spelling (Mulhall, 1992; Murray, l987; Strickland, l990; Sulzby, Teale and Kamberelis, 1989).

Journal writing is unstructured writing with a minimum of rules (Anderson, l993; Fields and Spangler, 1995; Zacharias, 1991) and is intended to promote writing fluency. Rather than rules, the teacher models expectations for journal writing, and students are encouraged to participate within those parameters. Journal writing is considered to be process writing, a concept which further encourages and justifies risk-taking. Writing is a complex task, and journal writing frees the student to concentrate on whatever aspect of the task currently seems important (Newman, 1984). Journal writing allows each child to approach text making in a unique fashion.

The contents of journals are personal and cover whatever subjects are of interest to the writer at the time (Fields and Spangler, 1995). To define the subject matter of daily entries would severely limit ownership, active student involvement and voluntary risk-taking (Zacharias, 1991). When children write from the perspective of their own world view, not only their writing progresses, but also their critical thinking skills.

At its optimum, journal writing encourages writers of all ages to learn not just more about writing, but about themselves as writers (Anderson, 1993). Journal writing supports the writer's entrance into the constructive process of theory building. (Surbeck, 1994). Engaged in journal writing, children are actively involved in building their own literacy foundations and applying that understanding.

The Role of the Teacher

Through acceptance of the efforts of all writers, the teacher in an emergent literacy program plays a vital role in insuring a classroom environment that promotes risk-taking. Children are exceptionally vulnerable as they construct their knowledge of the written language. Unnecessary censorship, unrequested help, and undeserved praise are among the factors that can severely limit an emergent writer's progress (Avery, 1992).

Creating a print-rich classroom environment, modeling prewriting strategies and actual journal writing, either with the whole group on chart paper or the overhead (Mulhall, 1992), or writing in a personal journal during journal writing time (Fields and Spangler, 1995), are key factors in providing the children a framework for their own writing.

It is of primary importance for the teacher to accept whatever forms of writing children choose to use in their journals (Sulzby, 1989). As noted earlier, it is perfectly legitimate for that writing to take one or several of a variety of forms, and to move back and forth between forms. Since journal writing involves whole text with important meaning to the writer, children will eventually move toward standard print as they construct their understanding of written literacy and as they seek to make their meaning as clear as possible to their perceived audience (Mulhall, 1992). Teachers can encourage progress in acquiring a sense of the written language in the same manner as progress in earlier oral communication was encouraged.

By accepting the forms and the contents of the children's writing, the teacher is helping to establish a climate of trust that allows writers to take risks and express themselves freely (Avery, 1992, Zacharias, 1991). The teacher needs to communicate reassurance to the writers that each of their entries is valuable precisely because of its unique qualities (Sulzby, et. al., 1989). Without that sense of permission and trust, journal entries can become mechanical, unimaginative and impersonal.

Rather than rushing to closure in journal writing, the teacher's job in empowering emergent writers is to accept whatever is produced, to listen for the meaning in each piece of writing, and communicate with the writer concerning that message (Avery, 1992; Newman, 1984). Constructive comments and open-ended, genuine questioning not only show respect for the communicative event, but also enhance the child's critical thinking processes. The teacher is there to scaffold, elaborate and extend the student's thinking and learning and support each writer in exploration and experimentation with language and literacy. The writer is always more important than the writing.

Interaction through Dialogue

Whether or not to share journal writing or seek response should be the choice of the writer (Fisher, 1991; Goodman, 1986). Children as writers will share the pieces they feel good about; those shared pieces reflect the writers' perceptions of their own growth and learning (Fisher, 1991).

Literacy interactions with adults are vital to the literacy learning of the child (Chapman, 1996; Routman, 1988). In an emergent literacy program where the writer feels encouraged to take risks, children are eager to share their writing. Responding in writing to a child's text is valuable reinforcement for journal writing (Mulhall, 1992).

Through dialogue and response teachers assure writers that their messages are important and that their stories have meaning. As the teacher takes the time to show a genuine interest , the uniqueness of each piece and its writer are validated (Avery, 1992, Goodman, 1986). A special relationship is formed (Heller, 1991). Collins refers to dialogue journals as "two people talking on paper" (1993). Dialogue offers the writer further purpose for writing and for making the message understandable to a wider audience.

Written responses that are conversational in tone are much more effective than evaluative comments (Fields and Spangler, 1995). Evaluative comments are inconsistent with the noncompetitive nature of journal writing. Children will more eagerly share their writing about personal events and beliefs if they are assured that neither they nor their writing will be assessed. More adults are nervous giving a speech to a critical audience then when dialoguing with a trusted friend.

Through the response in a dialogue journal, the writer has tangible proof that the

teacher values both the message and the sharing of meaning. Frequency of response helps define the writer's view of journaling as communication. Just as daily writing encourages writing and facilitates the understanding of writing conventions, daily response promotes two-way communication and the understanding of how to make that communication more effective (Newman, 1985).

While response may model the standard spelling of words in the child's message and thus encourage further development (Fields and Spangler, 1995), the teacher's response should neither be perfunctory nor artificial. It should be interesting. As much thought should go into the response as is expected in the child's writing. The most effective responses are those that show appreciation for the writer as well as the writing (Clay, 1975). Through authentic and positive responses teachers build on the trust already established in the classroom and encourage continued construction of knowledge about standard writing conventions and continued efforts in applying that knowledge.

Teacher response in dialogue journals can serve as encouragement to the emergent writer. Encouragement is necessary for students to become confident writers (Calkins, 1986). Honest response and authentic dialogue compliment journal writing and further motivate the writer to make the writing "right". Dialogue emphasizes both the interconnection between writing and reading and the partnership of the teacher and the student in the classroom.

Journal Writing in Room 29; Before

Journal writing was introduced in our kindergarten classroom during the second week of the school year, in September, l995. I set up the overhead projector and discussed with the children what I might choose to write about. Together we decided that the morning's walk in the woods was noteworthy. Initially I sketched a quick picture of the woods and path, then printed two sentences describing what we had experienced. On the next two consecutive days I repeated this activity with the whole class.

The following week, at the beginning of our specified journal time (following lunch and outdoor activities), each student received approximately twenty sheets of blank paper in a three pronged folder. Markers, crayons and pencils were available either on the group tables or at the writing center. Students were instructed to write their names on the covers. By this time, each of the twenty-five children was able to write either the first initial, some of the first name, or his/her entire first name. These signatures were identifiable both to the children and myself. The journal covers were a variety of colors which also aided in journal recognition. Teacher-decided rules for journal writing were: write on a one page spread each day,use indoor or quiet voices to facilitate the thought processes of anyone who might require quiet for thinking about writing, and work at writing the whole time (That is; thinking about writing, talking about writing, or writing were the only activities permitted during journal time.). It soon became apparent that these rules were not appropriate for all the children. Exceptions were made.

Students generally wrote at one of the three groups of tables in the classroom. A few preferred to work on the floor or at the bench near the window. Some stood while writing, most sat. During this time, I circulated among the writers and discussed their writing with them. I nearly always said, "Tell me what you're writing about today." The children were generally eager to discuss their writing with me. During the first half of

the year, the entries were primarily drawings with occasional captions, memorized words, copies of environmental print, or names copied from the class roster.
I did not conference with each student every day. I made an effort to meet with each child at least once each week. I rarely wrote in the students' journals. Upon request I would use conventional spelling to write a word, phrase or sentence that the child dictated. I encouraged the students to write their own words as they "heard" them.

Occasionally, I would sit with a group of writers and make an entry in my own journal. I emphasized prewriting strategies before I wrote. Often I included events or people with whom the class was familiar. This delighted the children, and sometimes a kindergartner would follow me through my early conferencing rounds and ask when I was going to do my own writing. Taking a hint from this, I began to write in my journal first, before proceeding to conference with students. After ten, fifteen, or, later in the year, twenty minutes, students were invited to return their journals to the journal tub and begin "choice time". If they chose to, they could continue writing. Two or three students always chose to continue writing past the designated journal time.

The children anticipated and enjoyed journal time. On days when there were conflicting events in the schedule, many students would find time to write in their journals during choice time. Journal writing remained a noisy time. Students appeared to relish comparing and conferring on their writing and drawing. Entire groups would draw the same types of pictures, discussing the best way to make a particular character or where to find the necessary information to complete their entries. Very rarely did students say there was nothing to write about or that they didn't know "how to write".

Still, I was anxious about our journal writing time. I was observing neither increased fluency nor diversity, and I reasoned that I should be. In January, many of the entries were very similar to entries by the same child much earlier in the school year. The same writing forms that were used in journal writing in October were still employed in January and in much the same ways. A child who had been drawing beautiful

concentric hearts and rainbows in September was continuing to draw beautiful concentric hears and rainbows in February. A group who had begun drawing Power Ranger characters in October was continuing to cover each journal page with Power Rangers in February.

I was observing a wider range of writing by the students in the classroom while writing class books and during choice time, both in the drama center and at the writing center. Also, students were bringing in letters and gifts for me from home that displayed a variety of writing exploration and experimentation. I felt our class was ready for a nudge forward in journal writing.

Adding Dialogue: The Process

During the first week of March, l996, I randomly chose and interviewed nine kindergartners (approximately one-third of the class) about their attitudes toward journal writing. The questions asked were:

1) How do you feel about journals?
2) What do you write about in your journal?
3) What do you notice about your writing?
4) What are your plans for your journal for the rest of the year?

Responses to question one were very positive, ranging from "excellent" to "pretty happy". Question two was answered with descriptions of drawings I had recently observed: Power Rangers, Ghost Rangers, family members, and animals. One child said, "Make-believe stories." Kindergartners thought their writing was "fun", "fine", and "nice and pretty". Ryan said he practiced his writing every day, and Meg mentioned that her writing was "getting better". In their replies to question four, seven students used the word "write", while two used the word "draw".

The following week I invited the children to begin a dialogue with me through their journal writing. I worded the invitation simply; "If you want me to write back, I will."

During the weeks that followed the invitation to dialogue, nothing about our journal time changed except that I wrote back to the children who asked me to. Often writers would request response by saying something similar to, "I'm ready for you to write to me."

I continued to conference with each student at least once each week, whether or not

the kindergartner wanted me to write to them. I repeated the invitation to dialogue at the beginning of each journal writing time, and again in the middle.

Besides dated samples of journal entries, I kept anecdotal records of student participation and reactions to our interaction during journal time. Comparing journal entries after the invitation to dialogue with those from before the invitation, I have been able to observe changes, if any, in range of writing forms, variety of journal entry contents, and amount of writing. Through the anecdotal records, I have been able to note any changes in enthusiasm for journal writing, number of requests for dialogue, and perceived student attitudes toward writing in general.

Results

Through classroom observation and reflection on the responses to the interview, I understood that journal writing time was a comfortable and valued time for our kindergartners. My goal, therefore, was to change the format only enough to encourage continued progress in constructing knowledge about written language and applying that knowledge.

Initially, I had planned to concentrate on one group of students and respond only in their journals, leaving the other students as the "control" group. This scheme did not take into account individual or group personalities or the random nature of our classroom, and that plan did not prove feasible.

As I conferenced with individual students about their writing, they let me know if they wanted me to respond. Students who were ready for me to write back but were in another part of the room, would either signal or bring their journals to me. Approximately nine students requested responses each day. These same nine students requested dialogue at each journal writing time. Ten students requested response once for approximately every three journal entries, and six students rarely or never requested dialogue with the teacher.

My notes reveal more than statistics and more than I would have predicted:
Earlier in the year, Vincent's journal entries included drawing, numbers, names, random letters written all over the page, and scribbles. Though Vincent only occasionally requested that I write in his journal, he sought out my journal each day and responded to **my** entries with random letters written left to right which he would then reread to me.
Meg's early journal writings consisted of pictures, dot-to-dots, and occasional common words or names. She did write messages using beginning and advanced invented spelling on the class message board. With the addition of dialogue, Meg

moved from pages of Power Ranger drawings in her journal to writing letters which began, "Dr. Mrs Henin," and ended with queries to insure my response. One day she told me she was going to write but that I didn't need to write back. Later I saw her entry; "I mis my mom." The following day, Meg once again wrote, "Dr. Mrs. Henin," and asked for my preference in pets. Meg had discovered multiple uses for her journal and was supported-by, not dependent-on, response.

Chad returned to concentric hearts and rainbows from earlier in the year but added captions, commentary and questions. Proving himself to be a master of understatement, Chad wrote, "I LAK TO DRO HRTS."

Jesse's journal contained Power Ranger pictures, renditions of the alphabet, and numbers before the addition of dialogue. After dialogue, Jesse added speech balloons to his Rangers so that they could question the teacher. He reread the questions from random left to right letters.

Earlier, Iyesha wrote her name, scribbles and letter-like shapes. Following the invitation to dialogue, Iyesha covered entire pages with lines of wavy scribbles. As she reread her detailed stories to me on a wide variety of topics, Iyesha checked often to see that my interest was focused on her rereading.

The change in Ben's writing was particularly dramatic. Earlier entries in Ben's journal consisted of pictures and letter-like shapes. Following the introduction of dialogue, Ben began to write full pages of invented spelling. Ben's writing displayed an understanding of both quantitative and qualitative principles. Ben wrote, waited for response, and replied again immediately.

Herbert had been writing scribbles and numbers in his journal. One day he made a "trail" which he asked me to comment on. After that, Herbert wrote random "boxed" letters and requested dialogue two or three times each week.

Donna's entries were mainly pictures, names, common words and the alphabet. Following the invitation to dialogue, Donna began to write stories using advanced invented spelling along with names and memorized words; "MIBRUYREZTAKEMETYSRKUS" (My brother is taking me to the circus!)

From the beginning of the year, Shane had made very sophisticated and detailed drawings in his journal with no other writing. Immediately after the introduction of dialogue, Shane began writing questions or comments under his pictures.

An unexpected result of introducing dialogue was that some students who never asked me for a response, began dialoguing through print with each other.

Adding the component of response encouraged some writers to practice skills that they hadn't applied to journal writing earlier. Changing the format to include dialogue expanded the writer's audience and gave journal writing another purpose. Knowing they would get a response after rereading their writing to me was impetus enough for some of the kindergartners competing for a moment of one-on-one time with two dozen other children, the intercom, and myriad other distractions.

Enthusiasm for writing continues to be high in our classroom. Even in these last weeks of school before summer vacation and with a healthy dose of spring fever (possibly more pronounced in Interior Alaska), kindergartners continue to write eagerly in their journals. For some this enthusiasm may be related to the addition of response to our journal time. Dialogue has added a new dimension and purpose for those students ready to embrace it. Because it is not mandatory, the addition of dialogue has not conflicted with the interests of those who are not.

Conclusion

My goals in adding dialogue to journal writing were to maximize student enthusiasm for writing and to increase their risk taking with print. These goals were met.

Journal writing has given me a way to view not only the students' progress in understanding written language, but also the childrens' compelling interests and their sophistication in communicating those interests. Journaling has given the students a nonthreatening place to explore writing, and dialogue offers additional reinforcement to those students who choose response.

There were some unexpected golden moments during this research. Vincent's writing to me in my journal (surreptitiously at first ("Mrs. Hannon! Vincent's writing in your journal!") and then boldly when he realized he had unspoken permission) was surely among them.

I see now that my modeling of journal writing at the beginning of the school year may have imprinted on many of the students an overemphasis on drawing in journal writing. More examples on the overhead or chart paper throughout the course of the year could serve as reminders about the use of text in journal entries. In my personal journal I no longer draw a picture. My goal for next year is to allow more student choice concerning other aspects of journal writing; e.g. size of journal, types of paper, noise level, etc. I will encourage dialogue the first day we write together.

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